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ABSTRACT

Pressure exerted by parents, college instructors, and politically mandated accountability systems have forced English teachers to reevaluate the effectiveness of secondary school curriculums. The temptation to return to the rote-learning and grammar drills of the past, although accentuated by these demands, should not be yielded to. Real English "basics" can be evaluated by asking the following questions of them: (1) Is this objective consistent with some coherent theory of instruction? (2) Is there any evidence that having students work toward this objective will actually help them use language more effectively? (3) Is this objective consistent with the developmental pattern of the learner? and (4) Is the objective based on real expectations? An open, process-centered curriculum design which involves the student directly should be the goal of English educators. (KS)

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WHAT'S BASIC AND HOW CAN YOU TELL?

Carol Kuykendall

Let's face it. We have not returned to Boston and the Basics by choice. The twin curriculum questions "What's Basic and How Can You Tell?" we approach gingerly, for these questions demand straightforward, once-and-for-all answers. Those of us who see language as a verb as well as a noun and curriculum as a fluid design for learning rather than a fixed outline for teaching fear laundry-list specifics that pose as THE basics. In a very real sense, we teachers of secondary English have been forced to the questions we are considering this morning--forced by headlines proclaiming our alleged failures, forced by irate college instructors of "Bonehead English," forced by politically mandated accountability systems, and especially forced by the realization that if we don't answer these questions satisfactorily, someone else will answer them for us.

Backs to the wall, we comprise an embattled profession. And traditionally, we have been reluctant, if not ineffectual, warriors. The formation of SLATE and the introduction of the EQUAL TIME column in the English Journal offer some promise that we are becoming more formidable, that we are developing an offense as well as a defense, but at the moment we feel vulnerable. Retreat has its appeals.

The image of English-teacher-as-warrior brings to mind Elder Olson's poem "Directions to the Armorer." In such beleaguered days, it is not hard to imagine that these lines are being spoken by our own collective voice:

Make me a shield with
Easy-to-change
Insignia. I'm often
A little vague
As to which side I'm on,
What battle I'm in.
And listen, make it
A little flimsy,
Not too hard to pierce.
I'm not absolutely sure
I want to win.[1]

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Shaking off such characteristic timidity, let's look at the givens: for better or worse, the latest of our easy-to-change insignias reads BACK TO THE BASICS. Drop the word "back"--with its full-speed reverse implications and its possibilities of infinite regression beyond the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome--and we can live with this insignia. We can all swear allegiance to the teaching of language basics, rightly defined. Ah, there's that rub--"rightly defined." During the next few minutes, we'll consider some guidelines for that definition and some ways that we as English teachers can collaborate to make curriculum decisions within those guidelines.

"What is basic?" On the broadest and most obvious level, there is little controversy, no battle: the English language arts are concerned with reading, writing, speaking, and listening--indeed, with thinking. Who can argue with the public demand that high school graduates be competent readers and writers? Who, in fact, can shrug off requests from prospective employers that graduates be able to decipher and complete application forms, then--when hired--follow simple directions and write intelligible reports? What could be more reasonable than the English professor's expectation that entering freshmen already read "on eighth-grade level," speak as well as write Standard English, and turn in paragraphs with well-supported topic sentences? For that matter, what's wrong with my own community's outrage over declining scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills?

Once we leave the common ground of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, a great deal is wrong--that is, if we infer that each of these demands represents a definition of English "basics" to which we must capitulate. It is here that we must abandon any vagueness as to which side we are on and which battle we are in. Though filling out an application form, discriminating between "shall" and "will," and scoring above the national norm on a standardized reading test may all reflect consummations devoutly to be wished, the skills they represent are not among the basics upon which we should build English curricula.

Perhaps the point is best illustrated by analyzing a typical standardized test. I'll take the Iowa, which seems to me neither better nor worse than most others. On eighth- and ninth-grade levels, the language section consists of one hundred and fifty-two items--twenty-nine on spelling, thirty-five on capitalization, forty-one on punctuation, and forty-seven on usage. Because each subtest carries instructions to "find the mistake," the entire language section ultimately assesses proofreading skills. The definition of basics implicit in such a test is clear: the fundamental language skills consist of proofreading for spelling, proofreading for mechanics, and proofreading for usage.

What an inversion! Proofreading, we all know, is after-the-fact, almost cosmetic. Though an important step in final preparation of a manuscript, proofreading merely polishes the surface of what has already been written. The undergirding skills that have enabled someone to compose sentences to <u>be</u> proofread more nearly qualify as the real basics. Beset by such inversions, we professionals begin to feel a bit like Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass. How can we ever convince our publics to look beneath the surface to the real fundamentals? After all, it took courage just for Alice to suggest that Humpty Dumpty might read his tablet more easily if it were held right-side-up and to remind the knight that while carrying his box upside-down kept the rain out, the contents were being spilled. If we are to set aright the topsy-turvy world of popular-mechanics basics, we must be even more assertive.

Paradoxically, we must begin by opening up the curriculum development process and listening very closely to the demands of which I spoke a moment ago. We cannot dodge the obligation for seeing that community expectations comprise the first set of guidelines within which to identify curriculum basics. We must begin to reduce hostility by asking parents, representatives of business and industry, members of the community at large, and especially students to participate in formulating broad goals for the English program. Certainly it is best to work

with small, informal advisory groups and to deal only with expected outcomes, never with methods of instruction. Most importantly, we must probe for the deep messages. What are parents, for example, really asking when they demand more emphasis upon grammar? Do they really want their sons and daughters to demonstrate virtuosity as diagrammers and parsers of sentences? Probably not. Chances are, they are more interested in the ability to speak and write clear Standard English when the occasion demands. Twenty-five years ago, we ourselves brainwashed those same parents into a blind reverence for workbook grammar, and now they have no way of knowing how embarrassingly little grammar has to do with good speech and good writing. Even so, if we listen closely enough, we should be able to hear the deep messages underlying oversimplified demands from our publics. Those messages give us broad guidelines within which to make curriculum decisions.

Ultimately such decisions must be made by teachers, not made once-and-for-all, then bound in velum;but made, tested, and modified every day. Not only must an English curriculum be evolutionary; it must also be subject to individual interpretation. We all know that the real curriculum is what goes on in a classroom after the door and the transom have been securely shut. And so it should be. Each classroom features a unique language community shaped by the diverse abilities, interests, and styles of both teacher and students.

Yet the different language communities behind those doors should reflect a consistency of purpose, for curriculum should be collaborative rather than wildly idiosyncratic, a matter of design rather than whim. Ideally, the curriculum that teachers have agreed upon should be printed--in loose-leaf form to keep it dynamic and open. Certainly, this document and each teacher's adaptation should embody a common core of language basics.

That core brings us back to the central question. How can groups of English teachers go about reaching their own working definitions of those elusive basics? Naturally, the mechanics of the process will differ according to situation. In Houston, with more than eight hundred secondary English teachers and a highly

mobile student population, we have even resorted to computer-processed questionnaires to reach consensus on basic curriculum objectives. A small department in a reasonably stable community could use a much simpler, less formal procedure. In any case, however, we must grapple with the same broad questions, questions that help us sift out the basics.

Having listened carefully to the community it serves, an English department might begin this sifting process by adopting the "How-Can-You-Tell?" questions proposed by Stephen Judy in Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English. To justify inclusion in the curriculum and certainly to earn status as a basic, an objective must pass four stiff test questions:

1. Is this objective consistent with some coherent theory of instruction--that is, with our beliefs about what people need to learn and how they learn it?
2. Is there any evidence (from research or experience) that having students work toward this objective will actually help them use language more effectively?
3. Is this objective consistent with the developmental pattern of the learner? Is it appropriate to the age, experience, and needs of the learner?
4. Is the objective based on real expectations (i.e. what we know of what student do and will do) rather than artificial expectations (what we think students should do or what we once did)?[2]

After objectives have been sifted through these criteria, a committee of students might be given the list for analysis and discussion. A departmental meeting with members of the student committee should provide abundant fodder for further refinement.

Notice that I have used the term objective without apology. Not wishing to belabor the controversy over behavioral objectives, I have assumed that every curriculum is built around objectives, behavioral or otherwise, some of which might be appropriately termed basic. Though there is no prescribed curriculum format, I am further assuming that diversified learning activities will be suggested for each objective and that these activities will be keyed to available departmental resources, both print and nonprint.

The next task of the English department, then, is to develop suggested learning activities. Again, I would subject proposed activities to at least one stringent test question: does this activity involve the student directly in the language process or does it merely seek to instruct him about the process?

I suggest this criterion for learning activities because I have seen too many vital objectives dehydrated by misguided activities. Permit me one personal horror story, lived just three weeks ago in an inner-city junior high school. The objective for this group of seventh-grade youngsters I would consider basic. Presumably, they were working toward the writing of original sentences. The activity, however, was anything but basic. On the board were thirty sentences about the history of tennis in the United States, prefaced by these instructions:

> Copy the sentences below, skipping every other line. Above each word, write the abbreviation for its part of speech. (See list of abbreviations below.) Enclose in parentheses each adjective, adverb, and prepositional phrase, drawing an arrow to the word modified.

An exaggerated example? I can only hope so. Anyway, it provides a painfully live example of an activity that flunks my test. Clearly, this activity fails to involve students in the language process. In a very tangential way, it seeks to instruct them about language.

Departments struggling with this phase of curriculum planning might well review a metaphor quoted by Alan Purves in How Porcupines Make Love. The subject is riding a bicycle, and the principle being discussed is that a cyclist stays upright by turning his handlebars back and forth to balance the centrifugal force pushing from one side with the gravitational force dragging from the other. Furthermore, we are told, the curvature of each winding of the bicycle is inversely proportional to the square of its speed. The application of this metaphor is worth quoting:

> Does this tell us exactly how to ride a bicycle? No. You obviously cannot adjust the curvature of your bicycle's path in proportion to the ratio

> of your unbalance over the square of your speed; and if you could, you would probably fall...for there are a number of other factors to be taken into account in practice which are left out in the formulation of this rule. Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art.[3]

Remember this metaphor when your department is weighing the question of whether to use drillbooks and how far to go in demanding rote adherence to rhetorical formulas.

Also remember this metaphor when your department is struggling to develop reading activities. Are students more likely to develop basic comprehension skills if they underline the blends and circle the long vowels or if they read a self-selected paperback and discuss it with other readers? Which is more likely to develop insight into a literary character, listing the four techniques of characterization or playing the character in a readers' theater rendition of the story?

As you consider activities in reading and in literature, think of the lines Alan Purves talks about in Porcupines, those invisible lines connecting reader and book.

> The response. That is the center of the curriculum in literature. Treat those lines carefully, or the book will become dead and the mind will retreat into itself. But treat those lines and you will have a response-centered curriculum.[4]

The process by which a department sifts out basic objectives and develops equally basic learning activities is, in a sense, an exercise in treating those lines, lines between a student and his language. So stated, the process sounds deceptively simple. In the best of all worlds, it might be.

But remember those publics out there--those publics that we all work for--those publics with all of their oversimplified, nostalgic, and even inverted notions of basics? What of them? Will they buy the open, process-centered curricula that result from such collaborative professional efforts as I've suggested today?

I believe that they will. Actually, we all want the same thing--young people who produce and receive language as well as they possibly can. If we exercise our soundest individual and composite judgment, I think that we can help more and more young people to reach their linguistic potentials. The choice is ours.

Let's return for a moment to Elder Olson's "Directions to the Armorer." Let's hear again what could be our own collective voice speaking those final lines.

> Make the armor itself
> As tough as possible,
> But on a reverse
> Principle: don't
> Worry about its
> Saving my hide;
> Just fix it to give me
> Some sort of protection--
> Any sort of protection--
> From a possible enemy
> Inside.

And worry we should about that possible enemy inside. That enemy says, "Yield. Yield to expediency, oversimplication, and nostalgia. Retreat. Retreat to the secure world of pseudo-basics." But I also hear a wiser and more compelling voice. It says, "Heat up the coffee, and sharpen the pencils. We didn't go back to Boston for nothing."

NOTES

[1]Stephen Dunning, Edward Leuders, and Hugh Smith (ed.), Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1969), p. 99.

[2]Adapted from Stephen Judy, Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1975), p. 153.

[3]Michael Polanyi, as quoted by Alan Purves (ed.), How Porcupines Make Love (Lexington, Mass.: Xerox, 1972), p. 54.

[4]Purves, p. 27.

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